

USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett gave the following remarks at a conference, cosponsored by USCIRF and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on May 6, 2013.

Thank you, Rainn Wilson, for that kind introduction.

It truly is an honor to speak to all of you today as we take part in a remarkable worldwide campaign which will continue through the middle of this month.

For the Baha’i community, it is fair to say that if circumstances were different from what they are today, this entire month could have been an occasion for joy and celebration.

For as Baha’is around the world are just emerging from their most festive period of the year, the Ridvan [REZ-VAN] season, we recall how 60 years ago this month, in May of 1953, the first Baha’i House of Worship in the West was completed just outside of Chicago.

Today, it stands as an inspiration to countless people, symbolizing the hope of freedom, unity, and peace that defines the faith of the Baha'i community. I wish I could say that the reason we are here today is simply to commemorate the anniversary of the completion of that magnificent spiritual center.

But of course, we stand here today for a more somber and difficult purpose. We are here on behalf of the Baha'is and all others whose freedom the government of Iran has taken away. We are here because five years ago, seven leaders were arrested around the country and eventually given 20-year prison terms based on groundless accusations ranging from espionage to "corruption on the earth."

But what these prison terms really signaled was the Iranian government punishing people for daring to be Baha'is. Simply stated, there was a theocratic government doing nearly everything in its power to prevent a faith community, 300,000 strong, from living in freedom and peace.

Why? Because this community, by daring to follow the dictates of conscience, found itself on the wrong side of the government's theology.

Since Iran's 1979 Revolution which ushered in the current theocracy, no group has been immune from repression.

From Christians to Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims to Jews, and even Shiite Muslims -- who, while being part of the majority, are still targeted when they dissent from the government -- every religious group has seen some of its members suffer from Tehran's oppressive policies.

But as we have documented in USCIRF's annual report, which we released on April 30, just last week, no group in the country has suffered more than the Baha'is.

While Iran is the birthplace of the Baha'i faith, its government considers Baha'is to be the most spiritually and political dangerous people in the nation.

Why?

Again, it's because their peaceful theology refuses to conform to the theology imposed by the government. Since 1979, authorities have responded to the Baha'is with ruthlessness driven by hatred and fear. They have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 of their co-religionists from government and university jobs. Baha'is are prohibited from establishing schools, places of worship, or independent religious associations. Their marriages

and divorces are not recognized. They have problems obtaining death certificates. They may not inherit property.

Baha’i cemeteries, holy places, and community properties often are seized or desecrated, and many Baha’i religious sites have been destroyed. Baha’is are barred from the military and across Iran, they often are denied employment. Articles in the government-run newspaper Kayhan and other media outlets have vilified the Baha’i community.

An October 2011 report by the Baha’i International Community, *“Inciting Hatred: Iran’s Media Campaign to Demonize Baha’is,”*

summarized the ceaseless drumbeat of anti-Baha’i propaganda in this way, and I quote:

“They are accused of being agents for various imperialist or colonialist factions; they face continuous but utterly unfounded allegations of immorality; they are branded as social pariahs to be shunned. The propaganda is shocking in its volume and vehemence, its scope and sophistication, cynically calculated to stir up antagonism against a peaceful religious community whose members are striving to contribute to the well-being of their society.”

Emboldened by Iranian law and policy, extremists have assaulted Baha’is and launched arson attacks against their property in several cities.

And what is the government’s response?

Authorities claim they cannot find the perpetrators. Yet these same authorities seem to have no problems finding innocent Baha'is to arrest, detain, and incarcerate.

Indeed, they have arrested nearly 700 Baha'is since 2005. By the end of 2012, at least 110 were being held solely because of their beliefs, ten times the number in 2005. Dozens of Baha'is await trial while others -- all of whom are seeking appeals -- have been handed prison sentences ranging from 90 days to several years. More than 500 Baha'is have cases pending, despite their release from detention.

In recent months, Iran's government has stooped to an atrocious new low in its imprisonment of innocent Baha'i citizens. It actually has been jailing babies less than a year old with their Baha'i mothers -- and it has done so at least three times in the town of Semnan alone. One of these babies had to be hospitalized outside of jail because of a lung disease contracted by unsanitary conditions inside. The three mothers and their infants remain incarcerated to this day as I speak.

So what are we to do in the face of this tyranny which targets an entire religious group -- a group that has done no harm to their country, posed no threat to its people, but whose members want only to live in peace and worship in accordance with their conscience?

As June elections approach, we demand that Iran free the Baha’i 7 and return them to their families and loved ones, their homes and their communities.

We demand that the government drop each and every charge against those with cases pending against them on account of their faith. We demand that Iran rescind every law permitting Baha’is to be killed with impunity. We demand that Baha’is be free to practice their faith fully and be granted complete access to public universities. And we urge the U.S. government to continue to identify and sanction those officials in Iran responsible for severe human rights and religious freedom abuses, including the Supreme Leader and president.

More than 70 years ago, when speaking about dictatorships of his own era, Winston Churchill had this to say about the people who were in charge: **“You see these dictators on their pedestals, surrounded by the bayonets of their soldiers and the truncheons of their police. Yet in their hearts there is unspoken – unspeakable! – fear. □ “They are afraid of words and thoughts!□ Words spoken abroad, thoughts stirring at home, all the more powerful because they are forbidden. □ “These terrify them. A little mouse – a little tiny mouse! – of thought appears in the room, and even the mightiest potentates are thrown into panic.”**

We, all of us here today, represent that tiny little creature called thought which so terrifies the potentates of Tehran who persecute the Baha’is and other Iranians. For the sake of every dissenting Iranian, let us stand together for the right to embrace thought and pursue it freely and peacefully to its destination of belief and practice. Let us speak to the government of Iran with one united voice that says: **Free all Baha’i prisoners and allow freedom of conscience and religion for all.**

Thank you.